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SUBJECT: PROMINENT JOURNALIST GIVEN REDUCED SENTENCE, WHILE
NATIONAL COUNCIL MEMBERS APPEAL REJECTED

¶1. (C) Summary: Syrian journalist Mazen Darwich was sentenced on June 26 to ten days in prison for libel against the general State administration. He received a reduced sentence of five days in prison after having spent three days in custody after being arrested on January 12. (Prior to the ruling some contacts were predicting that Mr. Darwich would receive up to a ten-year sentence.) The human rights community in Syria is supportive of the leniency extended to Darwich, but many see this ruling as an exception to the recent trend of harsh sentences on human rights and civil society activists. Meanwhile, the Court of Cassation rejected an appeal to dismiss charges against Damascus Declaration National Council members, a move that signals trials are likely due to begin in the next month. End Summary.

The Case of Mazen Darwich

¶2. (C) Mazen Darwich was arrested on January 12, 2008 while covering a riot in the Damascus suburb of Adra, and charged with "defaming the State's bodies." (Darwich was called in by police for his ongoing coverage of an anti-SARG demonstration outside of Damascus.) He was released three days after his Jan. 12 arrest, but was still required to stand trial. The state security authorities seized Mr. Darwich's personal property including a laptop and documents related to the unpublished press report. At his final sentencing on June 26, Darwich was given a ten-day sentence which the court reduced to five days due to his having served three days in prison.

¶3. (C) According to the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression, an organization headed by Darwich, the sentencing "establishes a new pattern of dealing with journalists which allows the Syrian government to punish journalists even before publishing their stories in a dangerous and unique precedent." This analysis appears to be consistent with other arrests of journalists and internet bloggers that have been brought to trial in recent months. Our human rights contacts are unsure why Darwich received such a light sentence, especially due to his prior arrest history, in which he served 18 days in 2002 on similar charges. Mr. Darwich's status among the diplomatic human rights community and the international media may be one cause for his relatively light sentence.

Court of Cassation Denies National Council Appeal

¶4. (C) As expected, Syria's Court of Cassation rejected an appeal filed by a group of human rights lawyers on behalf of arrested National Council (NC) members to overturn a decision to refer their cases to a criminal court. (Note: Had the appeal succeeded, the charges could have been dropped or referred to a court that tries misdemeanor cases.) The decision signals that trial dates will be scheduled soon.
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